MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

Number 8
November 1956

Jean-Paul Benoit, the author of the following article, is a member of the Reformed Church of France. He has long been associated with evangelistic work among French workers. For the past 10 years he has been director of the Société Centrale d'Evangélisation and is the editor of "La Revue de l'Evangélisation".

EVANGELISING THE WORKERS?

May I describe a personal reminiscence, which happened many years ago? It was in June 1920. I had not long been demobilised and was studying for my examinations, in the gentle climate of the Mediterranean surrounded by the chirping of crickets. Suddenly I received an S.O.S. One of our great evangelists among the workers in the North of France was asking me ... to help him! Soon afterwards I was installed in the midst of the little black cottages (1) near the Belgian frontier; my colleague left me there alone the day after my arrival; he collapsed with a terrible septic throat due to over-work.

As I had been entrusted, at the age of 20, with the command of 50 men in the first firing-line, I had no inferiority complex at the age of 22 when faced by "the problems of evangelising the workers". I was immediately taken into the hands of Someone greater than myself. And for a third of a century it has been my naive faith that the workers can understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ (if one uses clear language in speaking to them) and will accept it just as readily as any other citizens of France.

French Protestantism always seems to have been interested in the working class and its struggles. It may even be asked whether it does not tend too much to believe that evangelising the world consists primarily in "visiting hell", i.e. going to the proletariat. Without going any further back in

(1) known in France as "corons", i.e. brick houses for workers, all exactly alike.

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉVANGÉLISATION · DIVISION DES ÉTUDES · CONSEIL ŒCUMÉNIQUE DES ÉGLISES

history, it was just after the war of 1870 that the "Mission Populaire" (started in the working-class district of Belleville, Paris, by an English minister named MacAll) opened 120 or 150 "Mission Halls" in the suburbs of our French cities, and the Société Centrale d'Evangélisation (of which I have been the very inadequate director for 10 years) began to evangelise the workers of the Pas-de-Calais and Northern France - weavers, miners, glass-blowers, metal-workers. Between 1920 and 1930 this work was in full swing. It attracted the enthusiasm of flocks of young pastors (though they did not all persevere), and a number of live, "open", working-class congregations were built up. Admission was by conversion; people left the group if they relapsed (which was unfortunately not infrequent) or if they moved to other districts. But the enthusiasm, the spirit of conquest, the boldness concerning social doctrine and mutual aid, the combination of prayer and action, practical work and Bible study, open-air preaching and seaside holidays for the children - all this was maintained. This testimony through life and word was based on the doctrines of the "Life and Work" movement which was started at the beginning of the 19th century in Alsace full of originality and prophetic vision, Pastor J.F. Oberlin and the industrialist Le Grand, both broad-minded pietists, full of understanding for people's problems and weaknesses.(2) Throughout the first half of the 20th century we have been reminded of the strength and authority of this evangelism by another man of God, also a pietist who believed in conversion: Henri Nick, Pastor at Fives-Lille (a centre of heavy industry, machine-tools, railways), a personal friend of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Lille, and worshipped by the communists.

The evangelism of the working-class in France is known to the world mainly through Catholic books, some of which have been sold in an impressive number of copies. About 1925 our Roman Catholic brethren realised that the proletariat knew nothing about their church and Father Lhande wanted to bring "Christ into the suburbs". About 1936, at the time of the big strikes and the Popular Front, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne - little groups of enthusiastic young militant Catholic workers - followed Van der Mersch's book "Fishers of Men". In 1942 the Abbé Godin affirmed "France, terre de mission" (France Pagan), shortly before his death. In 1945 enthusiasm and hope was raised by the Reverend Father Montuclard with "Jeunesse de l'Eglise", and shortly afterwards by the worker-priests with "Les Saints vont en enfer". Now that this movement has been abruptly forbidden by Rome, one wonders whether Catholicism is not trying to win back the 20 million French people (not all workers) who never go to church, by quite different methods. And one seriously wonders also whether all these efforts, and the publicity given to them, have really led many of the proletariat to a knowledge of Jesus Christ.

* * * *

Having picked up these facts, very briefly and prosaicly, I should like to sum up some of my personal impressions, sincerely hoping that I may be contradicted if that will show me my mistakes, and hoping also to assist

---

(2) They were among the pioneers in the International Labour Legislation. See "J.F. Oberlin, pasteur d'hommes" (Editions Oberlin, Strasbourg).

our ecumenical enquiries in this field, which I fear has not been explored very much during the last ten years.

The worker is not primarily a worker; he is primarily a man. This fact is too often forgotten. Why should he, more than anyone else, be regarded primarily as a producer or a consumer, a trade-unionist, or as solely responsible for reconstructing the world? The Christian message is addressed to man and claims to have an answer to all the problems with which life confronts every man. In one of our congregations in the North of France, the seven members of the Church Council include two middle-class (an engineer's wife and a pharmacist), three socialist workers and two communists (one woman and one man). When a new pastor came to their church, these two communists (who were members of the Party) requested him not to preach in the pulpit about "political" problems but to confine himself to "preaching the Christian Gospel". And the previous pastor had not been exactly "bourgeois" in his convictions; far from it!

It is certain that the Gospel, and Jesus Christ, are concerned about man, the whole man, and also about the world and history, and about the final culmination of history; but the Gospel is also addressed (perhaps first of all) to the individual. God knows us by our names. In the Gospel baptism is never bestowed on institutions (3) but always on human beings of flesh and blood to whom God gives a new name. The Gospel therefore can inspire every sphere of life, including the social system, but what it preaches is the conversion of man. The social message and the salvation of the world cannot be separated from the regeneration and forgiveness of the sinner in a working-class milieu any more than elsewhere. These are obviously banal truths, but it seems useful to emphasise them sometimes, so that the proletariat admits them. At the time of Billy Graham's evangelism campaign in Paris 1955 (which was primarily an appeal to conversion), of the thousands of "decision-cards" which were signed one-quarter came from working-class men and women in the suburbs.

Communism has no right to describe itself as "the mouthpiece of the workers" either in France (where only a quarter of the electors vote communist) or elsewhere. Many farmers and landlords, intellectuals and middle-class people support the French Communist Party, even if they are not registered as members. On the other hand, large sections of the workers vote against it (as is proved by Guy Mollet's experience, if this situation had not already existed a very long time). Moreover, the worker's indifference towards political parties and even towards trade-unions is incredible! We complain about the meagre attendance at our church-services, but if we attended the trade-union meetings we should be comforted (unfortunately). And in some of the "Peace Movement" groups, if there were no Christians the membership would have been extremely thin during the last few years.

Why then is the worker in France usually so detached from the Christian faith? This is a serious problem which we should do well to study more seriously. The responsibility certainly rests partly upon the generally reactionary attitude of the Catholic Church (especially in the mines);

---

(3) Quite a current expression in certain circles.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/ecumenical-letter-on-evangelism_1956-11_8

another reason may be the fact that not enough care has been taken to build new churches in close proximity to the new housing-estates for workers. But in my humble opinion the real reason lies much deeper. Are we forgetting that in the 18th century France was the country of Voltaire and Diderot, those deistic, anti-Christian inspirers of the 1789 Revolution for promoting the liberty of the People? Are we forgetting that during the 19th century this basically humanist trend was intensified by the whole scientific movement? "God is dead", cried Nietzsche, "and it is we who have killed Him". Since then the Gospel has been regarded as an old truth, which has become obsolete. God has been superseded by Science which offers man what the Bible promises him: health, bread, security, freedom and even peace, pending the improvement of humanity. These same convictions are held by many other milieux in France, especially by intellectuals who have never belonged to the proletariat. But perhaps the workers in France have fallen more easily under the sway of this optimism than the other social classes, for three reasons. Firstly, since 1880 the secular schools in France have held these (atheist) convictions more firmly than the secondary schools or universities. Secondly, when he leaves school at the age of 14, if the future worker continues his education he enters the technical school, which is entirely dominated by this mechanistic concept of Truth. Thirdly, Science and Reason place all men on an equal footing, and their daughter, the Machine, is becoming one of the most effective instruments for liberating the proletariat; the Machine gives the worker self-respect, owing to his value as an indispensable technician. Marxism also flaunts itself to be, not a philosophy but, a science - the science of the life of societies, of which it claims to have discovered the immutable laws, and to be able to predict the future at the same time as it constructs it. If the above diagnosis is not too incorrect, it must be said on the one hand that the workers are by no means the only people, nor the first people, to live by these convictions; on the other hand, in preaching Christ to the workers we should be fools to minimise the importance of this background, which forms the basis for everything that they do and everything that they believe.

Two facts must, I think, be emphasised here:

1. In France, where I have done a lot of travelling about during the past 10 years, the rural population today (apart from a few remarkable exceptions) seems to be just as "de-Christianised"(4) as the workers in the towns. At any rate our village people seem to be less open to evangelism. At the end of the 19th century the French Protestant Church undertook some village evangelism, which was really successful. But since the last war I have only seen one corner in the whole of France (in the Aisne, in North-East France) where an embryo church is being built up whose members were formerly sceptics. But during the same period our Société Centrale d'Evangélisation alone has succeeded in launching a whole series of new "Evangelism Centres" among the workers in towns, and these are all running well. It is true, we have no evangelist qualified for rural districts, whereas we have some remarkable evangelists working among the workers in the towns; but is not this fact symptomatic?

---

(4) This word is over-used and should be abolished. At what epoch has France ever been "Christianised"? Under Louis XIV?

2. But if we are talking among ardent members of the ecumenical movements, we should be wrong and naive if we ignored the fact that "Pentecostalism" has been remarkably successful during the last 25 years in creating living Christian communities in our French cities, built up mainly of working-class people whose origin is almost entirely non-Protestant. And one sometimes wonders whether the most "anti-ecumenical" Christian groups do not prove the most enthusiastic and effective when proclaiming the Gospel to contemporary pagans. Perhaps this is explained by the simplicity of the message given by these evangelists, especially by the Pentecostalists, or by their insistance on the fact that faith receives tangible response from the Living God. The worker is always a realist, but so were the people in the Bible. (In parenthesis I may add that during the last few months a strong movement has been started by the Pentecostalist evangelists - in full agreement with some of our French Reformed pastors - to convert the gipsies! And these evangelists are very poor people, often illiterate, themselves members of the proletariat.)

* * * *

A few comments

The converted worker is not always the best evangelist in a working-class milieu, nor is the pastor of working-class origin (whose theological training very soon turns him into a member of the middle class). One may even venture to say that the most "progressive" pastors (or priests) do not always seem to be the most effective evangelists, nor those who appeal most to the workers.

Sometimes we are accused of bringing the worker to a knowledge of the liberating power of Christ solely in order to draw him away from his class, and his trade-union, and to turn him (or his son) into a "petty-bourgeois" in the most unpleasant sense of the word. If this is true, we must strike our breasts in contrition. But if people ask us "Why doesn't the proletarian remain a proletarian, after his conversion to Christianity?" that really is naive! One would like to see <u>you</u> in such a situation! If one knows anything at all about "working-class conditions" one realises that no one is going to remain in that position unless he is obliged. He may be constrained to do so in response to a call from God, which he may joyfully accept; but it must be regarded as a happy outcome of the power of the Gospel if a proletarian Christian gives his children a better chance than he had himself. There is no reason whatsoever why a man born in the proletariat should be obliged to remain there, nor why the son of a middle-class family should not be called to live among the workers. (Thank God, this also happens.)

On the other hand certain milieux (sometimes very middle-class) seem to have a strange fetishism for the worker, as such. Do they imagine the worker to be the Messiah of modern times? Do they believe that his poverty in the past has made him the only man without (social) sin? Literature and propaganda have played about too much with these themes, but the Gospel will

not permit us to accept them. The reason why the Gospel perceives Jesus to be the true Messiah is not that he is a carpenter's son.

In fact, one wonders whether the problem of evangelising the workers is not a false problem. In the Acts of the Apostles, the first evangelists never seem to have been troubled by the problem of preaching the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to selected social classes. But there was a proletariat in existence at that time, represented by the millions of slaves. We recognise that the workers are living in deplorable conditions today, especially as far as housing is concerned in France (though not always, and they are not the only people); we help him to struggle for better conditions and (what is much more) for the recognition of his human dignity. But in so doing we are merely being faithful to the charity of Jesus Christ - the charity which demands justice in this world for its weakest members. But (to call a spade a spade) that is not "evangelism". And it would be a disaster if separate churches were to be set up in our towns, some for workers and others for the middle-classes.

* * * *

But one thing must be said: our established churches (or those who claim to be responsible for them) do not pay sufficient attention to preaching Christ to those who do not know him, on their own doorstep. This raises a number of definite problems. If we examine the ecumenical work done during the last ten years, the work done by our Commissions for Evangelism does not seem to have been the best. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the ecumenical movement sprang from the missionfield. Why are we marking time like this? Has it been a mistake to mix the problems of missions and the problems of "the younger churches" with the problems involved in evangelising pagan Europe? The death of William Temple, that man of prophetic vision, is a great loss to us. Does Western Christianity realise what new problems are raised by modern scepticism, which is entirely different from the mentality of the 16th century and from the Graeco-Roman paganism confronted by St. Paul, entirely different from African animism (not to mention Mohammedanism, which we never face at all), and entirely different from the great pantheist religions of the East? Does the training of our pastors tend too much to a literary, theoretical concept of Truth - in a world which believes only in Action? Have our churches (which are always looking back at the past) given up believing that the Gospel could penetrate the atheist masses of our civilised nations today? Perhaps we have not meditated enough on that strange 50-page document entitled "The Acts of the Apostles". The message of Evanston recognised Jesus Christ to be the sole true evangelist, and this truth was confirmed by the conference at Davos; what is the significance of this for our witness today?

We must ask ourselves these questions every day, and put them constantly before our Christian congregations. If the Lord grants me a few more years of life, I pray that He may permit me to use them for this purpose. And I am very grateful to those who have enabled me to bring these questions before you, my brothers in Christ, who read this paper. In my view these questions are the most important thing in this inadequate report.

* * * *